

Miracles in Concrete is compromised by the acceptance and verbatim repetition in the texts of Komendant's claims—made in interviews, essays, and his book—of authorship of a number of the concepts central to Kahn's projects. Only if readers take the time to search through the endnotes will they find that a number of Komendant's claims are either unverifiable or simply untrue. While he was often quite critical of Kahn, Komendant also said that Kahn's initial designs were almost always exactly right for realization in concrete. Intriguingly, Kahn's only statements included in the book, two short notes, are uniformly positive, praising Komendant's ability to find the appropriate form for concrete structure. A suggestion of the nuanced nature of the constructively critical relationship between Komendant and Kahn may be found in an early structural sketch for the Palazzo dei Congressi, made in consultation with Komendant. Below a sketch of the plan and section of the bridge-like suspended congress building, Kahn wrote in large letters, "We like this," and in small letters below, "(for the moment)."⁴

ROBERT MCCARTER
Washington University

Notes

1. August Komendant, *Prestressed Concrete Structures* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952).
2. August Komendant, *18 Years with Architect Louis I. Kahn* (Englewood, N.J.: Aloray, 1975).
3. See William Whitaker's foreword to *Miracles in Concrete*.
4. The referenced drawing is in *Miracles in Concrete*, 291.

Stanislaus von Moos and Martino Stierli, eds.

Eyes That Saw: Architecture after Las Vegas

Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2020, 256 pp., 125 color and 50 b/w illus. \$49 (paper), ISBN 9783858818201

"Las Vegas is not the subject of our book," Denise Scott Brown declared in the preface to the 1977 second edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, originally published in 1972 and cowritten with Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour.¹ What that subject might be is something that critics, historians, and architects have been trying to figure out for the last half century. Why should architects and students focus on popular

and commercial developments in a place such as Las Vegas? Is it a problem if they suspend critical, aesthetic, or moral judgment? And how can such a study nourish contemporary architecture—with what effect—and for whom? These are also questions whose meaning and relevance for architecture have changed over time.

Eyes That Saw: Architecture after Las Vegas is one of several recent books that examine the significance and the legacy of *Learning from Las Vegas*. It collects about twenty contributions to the symposium of the same name, organized at Yale University in January 2010 by historians and theoreticians, but also artists (such as Elizabeth Diller, Dan Graham, and Peter Fischli) as well as practicing architects (such as Rafael Moneo and Stan Allen) and Venturi and Scott Brown themselves. In their introduction, Stanislaus von Moos and Martino Stierli suggest that "the discipline today seems to be torn between an activist stance that refuses to engage in the politics of form, insisting instead on the primacy of social planning and on the management of the economic interests and conflicts that precede design decisions, and a complacent one, which contents itself with the growing demands of the culture industry, producing luxury commodities for high-end consumption" (13–14). By choosing *Eyes That Saw* as the title for the volume, the editors signal different things at once. First of all, this is an apologetic book: by inverting the title of the fourth part of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* from 1924 ("Des yeux qui ne voient pas"), von Moos and Stierli indicate that they want to highlight "the synthesis of poignant observation and radical invention as a shared tradition in architectural modernity, if not as the very condition of art, and of giving shape and meaning to the environment" (14). The word "see" has, indeed, two meanings here: it is about sensitively noticing what is manifesting itself in society, but it is also about form, about recognizing the visual aspect of those social changes, and about wishing to visualize them anew, by means of architecture, buildings, and material objects. The false distinction between form and content that indeed seems to overshadow current architectural debates is thus confronted with a historical counterexample, of a group of architects who were both formalist and socially engaged and at the same time worked from the

belief that there is, or should be, no difference between ethics and aesthetics. Likewise, the link with Le Corbusier gives this collection a doubled, slightly polemical charge. Since the Swiss-French architect spoke of "eyes that do not see," architects who look away from Las Vegas are implicitly accused of selective blindness or unworldliness, or of an elitist attitude that turns away from what is "really" going on. Connecting Scott Brown, Venturi, and Izenour with Le Corbusier, moreover, is also a historiographic dare, challenging the clichéd and somewhat lazy distinction between the modernism of the interwar period and the postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s, in favor of more sustainable artistic, rhetorical, and aesthetic strategies.

What many of the essays in this book bring to light is not only the complex and contradictory nature of *Learning from Las Vegas* but also, and more importantly, the notion of architecture as a difficult whole. To realize this, it appears best not to stay too close to the book's subject. Those scholars in this volume who remain inside the thematic, theoretical, and discursive realm defined by Scott Brown and company (visible in the many footnotes that cite telephone conversations with Scott Brown for historiographic accuracy) risk missing an important, if not the most lasting, lesson of *Learning from Las Vegas*: the production of cultural knowledge happens through unexpected detours. One case in point is the contribution by von Moos that deals with Venice, a city in which appearances, surfaces, spectacles, and symbols have always predominated. Von Moos turns Venice into a predecessor of Las Vegas, but also into a European city that has been perhaps more significant than Rome for the work of Venturi and Scott Brown. Neil Levine discusses their work in the light of Victor Hugo and Henri Labrousse, revealing important insights concerning the distinction between the "duck" and the "decorated shed," and thus between constructing decoration and decorating construction, and between classicist and more modern, pragmatic ways of doing architecture. Both the von Moos essay and the Levine essay present the task of the architectural historian as revealing continuities with the past but also shifts within those continuities, instead of dramatically proclaiming brusque endings and new beginnings.

The connection between the writings and the theories of Venturi and Scott Brown and their architectural designs and buildings is another common thread throughout the book. Immediately another book comes into view: Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, around which Stierli compiled a similar volume in 2019.² Reading some of the texts—in particular the contributions of the late Karin Theunissen, who offers a compositional reading of buildings by Venturi and Scott Brown but also of theoretical concepts from their books, as well as that of Stan Allen, who rightly calls attention to their often exceptional plans—the impression is that *Complexity and Contradiction* has been important for architectural design, while *Learning from Las Vegas* had repercussions for architectural culture. Neither book was read by nonarchitects (as Valéry Didelon's reception study indicates), let alone by the “residents” of Las Vegas. Perhaps a next symposium or book can also put those distinctions into perspective.

CHRISTOPHE VAN GERREWEY
École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne

Notes

1. Denise Scott Brown, preface to Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), xv.

2. Martino Stierli and David B. Brownlee, eds., *Complexity and Contradiction at Fifty: On Robert Venturi's "Gentle Manifesto"* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2019).

Miles Orvell

Empire of Ruins: American Culture, Photography, and the Spectacle of Destruction

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9780190491604

One of the most arresting images in Miles Orvell's *Empire of Ruins* is a photograph of birch trees growing directly out of a mass of decomposing books in a long-abandoned building in Detroit. That books should be reduced to tree compost in the ruins of the building that once housed them is particularly disturbing for those of us who think of books as embodying the world's culture, knowledge, and imagination. It is a shock

and a reminder of the fragility of what we value. This picture showing the horror of a library that has literally gone to seed comes from Andrew Moore's *Detroit Disassembled* (2010), one of a number of photo books published in the past two decades that examine the decline and fall of the great structures of Detroit.¹ Along with Moore's powerful photography, Orvell presents the work of other photographers of Detroit's ruination, including Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, whose 2010 book *The Ruins of Detroit* is perhaps the most celebrated of the genre.² Orvell quotes Marchand and Meffre's description of their images as redolent of the “fall” of the American Dream, following upon the fall of Rome, Cairo, and Athens. He notes that they cite Diderot's observation that “everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes,” an idea that in turn Percy Bysshe Shelley incorporated in his poem “Ozymandias” (1819), which features the words of an inscription on the base of the ruined statue of an Egyptian pharaoh: “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” (83). The achievements of individuals and civilizations move toward the inevitable end point of ruin. Another author, Camilo José Vergara, has undertaken a long and complex photographic project documenting Detroit and other declining American cities over long periods of time.³ Unlike Marchand, Meffre, and others, Vergara examines these sites not so much as objects of a kind of sublime beauty but as the focus of an epistemological exercise that he undertakes with extraordinary patience and meticulous organization.

Picturing American cities in this way would have been unthinkable even a few decades ago: in the United States, the understanding of ruins has differed greatly from the understanding that evolved in Europe. The forward-looking drive and optimism of American culture generally precluded the feelings of nostalgia, longing, and loss often evoked by ruins in Europe, where the appreciation of ancient Roman remains, and later the otherworldly fragments of ancient Greece, did much to shape literary and aesthetic culture. If eighteenth-century works such as the paintings of Hubert Robert and Sebastiano Ricci marked the culmination of this tradition, the subsequent construction of fake ruins, ironic

as this might appear, advanced the idea of the picturesque landscape in England and elsewhere. In contrast, the United States has clearly favored ideals of progress, where the old needs to make way for the new and improved, to serve the needs of the future. In the past, the destruction and total reconstruction of cities such as Chicago and San Francisco following massive fires and earthquakes allowed for no looking back, and instead provided opportunities to build not only more but also better.

However, with the twenty-first century a visceral sense of destruction penetrated the core of America's self-image, and thus it is appropriate that the events of 9/11 provide a substantial part of the interest and current relevance of Orvell's book. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center's twin towers was unlike any event before or since. Given the place and time of the attack, its impact has been far greater than that of the enormous devastation of European cities and even the unparalleled destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the atom bomb during World War II. The most recurrent image associated with the bomb was that of its detonation followed by an enormous mushroom cloud. Although an appalling sight, this told nothing of the effects on the ground. Images of the terrible devastation caused by the total erasure of those cities remained inaccessible because of censorship, both by the occupying American forces and by later Japanese governments.

Many witnesses filmed and photographed the events of 9/11 as they happened, and the images were widely reproduced in the mass media. Orvell discusses two photographers in particular who not only documented but also created powerful images of the destruction of the towers. The photojournalist James Nachtwey, who happened to be on-site at the time, captured some of the most memorable moments of impact and shock in photos published later in *Time* magazine and elsewhere. Among the other images that Nachtwey recorded, Orvell includes his photograph of the cloud of debris produced by the collapse of the south tower, framed by other surviving buildings, and fronted by a crucifix. Another photographer, Joel Meyerowitz, began shooting several days later and continued to do so for months afterward.⁴